
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

THE
BLOOD
OF
FLOWERS

A NOVEL



ANITA AMIRREZVANI

A conversation with the author of *The Blood of Flowers*

Anita Amirrezvani talks about inspirations, Iran, and the origins of her first novel.

The Blood of Flowers is a rich historical story of one woman's struggle to overcome misfortune. What was your inspiration for this novel?

Before I started to develop the plot, one of my main concerns was to provide a more nuanced view of Iran than we normally see in the news. For nearly thirty years, the United States and Iran have not had diplomatic relations, which means that knowledge of each other at an ordinary, human level has steadily decreased. After so many years of blackout, I thought people might be interested in learning things that go beyond the politics of the moment. In my book, I focus on typical cultural traditions, like the craft of carpet-making and the art of storytelling, to provide a broader view of the people and the place. I wanted to draw readers so deeply into the life of the seventeenth century that they would be able to imagine the deep indigos and crimsons of traditional carpets and almost smell the rose water. As for the specifics of plot and character, they developed very slowly over five or six years, so I can't point to any one source of inspiration.

Are your characters based on certain people you know, or are they products of your imagination?

My characters aren't based on actual people but rather on actual situations that Iranian women might have faced. My heroine, for

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example, expects to get married at the age of fourteen, like most of her friends and her relatives. That was not unusual in Iran until fairly recently. My grandmother, who was born in 1910, married at fourteen, and her daughter, who was born in 1933, did the same. (Today the average age of marriage in Iran for women is twenty-three, according to government statistics, while in the United States it is twenty-five.)

What was your inspiration for the narrator?

I was inspired by traditional tales, in which it's common for the protagonist to set out on a life-changing quest and slay dragons along the way. These "dragons" may be external or internal. In *The Blood of Flowers*, my heroine faces unexpected challenges after her father's death and must set out on a journey of her own. As the only child of parents who were unable to conceive for fifteen years, she has been raised with great indulgence and doesn't always know a good idea from a terrible one. As she goes through life, her unique personality flaws get her into trouble.

Although you were born in Iran, you were raised in the United States. To what extent do you consider yourself Iranian? What is it like to write about a place you are both a part of and cut off from? Do you visit Iran often?

I describe myself as an American of Iranian descent with deep ties to Iranian culture. Since more Iranians now live outside the country than ever before, and since most left because they did not support the results of the 1979 revolution, for the first time, there is a large, multigenerational Iranian population outside Iran trying to sort out its complex feelings toward the motherland.

For me, it was much easier to write about a previous century than it would have been to write about today because we are all at an equal distance from the past. I would not attempt to write a novel

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set in contemporary Iran, since I don't experience it on a daily basis. As for visiting the country, I try to go every two or three years because I have dear family there and I also enjoy being a tourist in those parts of Iran that I don't know. The country is culturally diverse, which makes it a fascinating place to visit.

Why did you decide to set the novel in seventeenth-century Iran, and how do you think this setting enhances the story?

The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were a remarkable period in Iran. The country was led by the great Shah Abbas, who was known for disguising himself so that he could go out, talk to ordinary citizens, and discover what was really going on in his kingdom. He was also an ambitious urban planner along the lines of Sheikh Mohammed of Dubai, but rather than building islands in the shape of palm trees, he focused on refashioning the city of Isfahan into the marvel that it is today. The Shah used the best minds of his court to create the Image of the World (the great square of Isfahan), which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. By setting the novel in this magnificent city, I hoped to introduce Western readers to Isfahan's wonders, especially since only the most intrepid travelers see it for themselves these days.

For my heroine, who grows up in a small village, the urban setting is all-important. It marks her transition from country bumpkin to city dweller, from immature girl to married woman, and from traditional rug knoter to sophisticated carpet designer.

Have you always been interested in historical fiction? What do you think historical novels offer readers that novels with more modern settings may not?

I love historical fiction because it is such a pleasant way to enjoy the past. While I might think twice before reading three thick volumes

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of nonfiction on, say, fourteenth-century Norway, I devoured each volume of *Kristin Lavransdatter*, the great fictional trilogy by Sigrid Undset set in that very time and place. Inevitably, historical fiction gives us more perspective on our own lives and illustrates that there are many valid ways to live.

In your research and writing, did you find many parallels between Iran's past and present? How would you describe the relationship between the world you describe and today's Islamic Republic?

An answer to this question could probably fill several books. Maybe it's most helpful for readers to know that a number of the customs I describe in my book still exist today. For example, temporary marriage has been legal in Iran for hundreds of years, although, like all customs, it has had ebbs and flows in popularity. Several other cultural elements that I depict have remained quite similar, such as the craft of carpet-making. Although today's wool may be spun on a machine rather than by hand and today's dyes are likely to be synthetic rather than natural, Iranian craftsmen and women continue to knot rugs on hand-strung looms in the time-honored traditional fashion, a great labor of love and a gift to the rest of us.

*You worked on *The Blood of Flowers* for nine years. Can you tell us what kind of research went into this novel? What were your greatest resources, both in writing and making sure you remained true to the time period?*

I went to Iran three times while I was writing the book to visit the settings that I describe, and I took notes on everything that seemed relevant. Back at home, one of my greatest pleasures was to spend time reading about the seventeenth century. One key source was the work of a scribe named Eskandar Beg Monshi, who wrote an extensive chronicle about Shah Abbas's reign. My book is not particularly tied to political events, but Monshi's account gave me in-

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sights into the way that the people of the period, especially powerful men, thought about things. I also consulted many art books, such as Arthur Upham Pope and Phyllis Ackerman's *Survey of Persian Art*, which has extensive photos of Iranian architecture, paintings, carpets, textiles, coins, and so on. I used these massive volumes — more than four thousand pages in all — as a reference on the art of the seventeenth century and beyond.

What, in the course of your research, was your most surprising insight into this period?

I became intrigued by how the movements of the stars were scrutinized, discussed, and feared. Monshi noted in his chronicle that a comet crossing the skies was creating havoc all over the country, resulting in severe earthquakes and episodes of bad behavior. Members of the court consulted astrologers and followed their advice closely, even to the point of delaying departure for a battle. Reading the stars was considered a critical part of the science of the times.

You wrote in your Author's Note that the narrator is purposely not named in tribute to traditional Iranian artisans, who often remained anonymous. Can you talk a little about this tradition? What does anonymity add to a story?

One morning when I was looking around my living room at my Iranian rugs, embroidery, and miniature paintings, it occurred to me that none of the work was signed. As in most parts of the world, the identity of the craftsperson was considered unimportant and went unrecorded and unrecognized. When I was writing my novel, my thoughts turned to the lives of these artists, and I began to wonder where they came from, what their stories were, and whether they were still alive. My heroine could well have been one of their ancestors. By not naming her, I hoped to point out that no records exist of

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these craftswomen (and men) who lived, breathed, and made beautiful things that we admire so deeply. In short, my goal was to acknowledge the labor of the “unnamed craftsperson” whose work has endured through the centuries.

Additionally, I was influenced by the fact that the protagonists in folktales are often unnamed, which I think gives those tales an “everyman” and “everywoman” quality. In other words, the heroine could be you.

The art of rug-making plays an important role in both the story and the narrator’s life. What role did rug-making play in seventeenth-century Iran, and how were rug makers regarded? Why do you think Iranians—led by Shah Abbas—placed such value on this exquisite art form?

In Iran, carpets occupied a more central role as furniture than they do in today’s Western living rooms. In a traditional Iranian room, you would sit on cushions placed right on the carpet, which means the carpet becomes an art piece that you experience rather than something you admire from afar. Carpets also impart a feeling of greenery in a country that is mostly dry and where gardens are greatly admired.

As for the role of rug-making in the seventeenth century, Iran had large nomadic and tribal populations that historically depended on rug-making to furnish their own tents or homes and to provide extra income for their families. Rugs have always been admired in Iran because of their beauty and functionality, but I don’t think that most laborers—the individuals working on their own looms—profited very much from this laborious handwork.

In the cities, things were different. The workers that Shah Abbas employed in his factories were highly skilled male artisans who were presumably treated with respect and well compensated. When their carpets were sold to foreigners, the state made money. I’m sure that’s part of the reason that Shah Abbas was keen on them.

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Interestingly, the oldest known hand-knotted rug, the Pazyryk Carpet, found in the mountains of Siberia, is said to be twenty-five hundred years old, so we know that the tradition goes back at least that far.

Rug-making is also an excellent metaphor for a novel. You work on it one knot at a time, until one day you have an entire carpet with a complex personality and history. Just like a life!

The Blood of Flowers is your first novel. Are you working on a second?

Yes. It's not a sequel, but it will continue my explorations into Iranian history. I've noticed a recent surge of books on medieval leaders such as Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, but to my surprise, there have been few novels on premodern Iranian movers and shakers, and even fewer on powerful women. That's fertile terrain for the novelist, and I'm happy that there's so much rich material to enjoy and to share.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. What is the significance of the novel's title? What does it mean in terms of both the narrator and the story itself?
2. How would you describe the author's writing style, and what do you think this style brings to the novel? Did you find anything striking or unusual about the way the story unfolds? Did it remind you of anything you have read before?
3. How much did you know about Iranian history and culture before reading this book? Did anything in the story strike you as completely unlike—or surprisingly reminiscent of—our lives today? What do you think you gain from reading a novel about a period in history, as opposed to a nonfiction historical account?
4. The author decided to leave the narrator anonymous, as is the tradition in many folktales. When, if ever, did you realize that you didn't know the narrator's name? What effect did the anonymity have on you as a reader? Does it matter whether or not we know a character's name?
5. Why do you think the author chose to include a number of Iranian tales throughout the novel? What did these stories add to your understanding of the book and of Iranian culture as a whole? Do you have a favorite story?
6. Though *The Blood of Flowers* is set in a time and place that may be very foreign to most readers, it is a universal story about a girl

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reclaiming her life and coming into her own. In what ways is this a familiar story? In what ways does this story differ from your own experience or from other coming-of-age novels you have read?

7. *The Blood of Flowers* explores many different relationships in the narrator's life—with her mother, her father, her uncle, her friend, and her husband, to name a few—all bringing out different sides of the narrator. Which relationship did you find the most compelling? Which did you find the most perplexing?
8. What is the meaning of the final tale, and why do you think the author chose to end the novel with this one? Is this the future you see for the narrator?
9. The intricate art of rug-making is incredibly important to the story, and to the narrator herself. What do you think rug-making represents with regard to the narrator aside from monetary benefit? What does it represent in the story itself?

Anita Amirrezvani's suggestions for further reading

Fiction

A Persian Requiem (also published as *Savushun*), by Simin Daneshvar

Published in 1969, this book is often described as the first novel by an Iranian woman. It tells the powerful story of a family that is forced to decide between feeding its own peasants and responding to British Army demands for Iranian grain during World War II.

The Blind Owl, by Sadegh Hedayat

This hallucinatory masterpiece was published in 1937 by one of the greatest modern Iranian writers. Hedayat uses traditional Iranian symbols to convey existential angst and a precipitous descent into madness.

King of the Benighted, by Manuchehr Irani (Houshang Golshiri)

This wrenching novella was first published in English in 1990 under a pseudonym. It was inspired by the twelfth-century tale "The Black Dome" by the poet Nizami Ganjavi, which is included.

Stories from Iran: A Chicago Anthology 1921–1991, edited by Heshmat Moayyad

This book traces the development of the short story from its earliest Iranian practitioners to writers who came of age after the revolution in 1979. It includes short biographies and photos of the writers.

Touba and the Meaning of Night, by Shahrnush Parsipur

In this unforgettable story of a woman's life during the tumultuous twentieth century in Iran, which spans the end of the monarchy

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and the beginning of the Islamic Revolution, Parsipur seamlessly weaves together political and social history with legend, myth, and fantasy.

My Uncle Napoleon, by Iraj Pezeshkzad

This extremely funny novel, which was made into a popular television series in Iran in the 1970s, features the antics of an extended Iranian family as seen through the eyes of a young lovestruck narrator. It shows a comedic side of Iranian life that few Westerners see.

Veils: Short Stories, by Nahid Rachlin

These spare, beautiful stories about Iranians in the United States and in Iran pack an emotional punch.

The Mullah with No Legs and Other Stories, by Ari Barkeshli Siletz

The author bases these stories on his fondly remembered youth in Iran before the 1979 revolution, offering a fascinating cast of characters from many different walks of life.

Strange Times, My Dear: The PEN Anthology of Contemporary Iranian Literature, edited by Nahid Mozaffari and Ahmad Karimi Hakkak

This is an essential collection of Iranian fiction and poetry published since 1979, much of it translated into English for the first time. It features more diversity than some previous anthologies.

Modern Persian Short Stories, translated by Mino Southgate

These short stories, many by noted authors, were published between 1932 and 1973 and provide a glimpse into the lives of typical Iranians.

Nonfiction

We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs, by Nasrin Alavi

A recent estimate puts the number of blogs in Farsi at eighty-five thousand. This book provides a sample of some of the most provocative writing on the Web from young Iranians who range from student activists to women taxi drivers.

New Visual Culture of Modern Iran: Graphic Design, Illustration, Photography, by Reza Abedini

This collection of recent posters and photographs demonstrates the inventiveness of Iranian graphic design in recent years.

To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America, by Tara Bahrampour

Bahrampour was eleven years old when her family came to the United States in 1979. This was the first major book to describe the experience of being Iranian in America in the postrevolutionary diaspora.

Iran: A People Interrupted, by Hamid Dabashi

This passionate view of Iran and its history over the past two centuries comes from a literature professor with a self-confessed “ax to grind” about the damage done by colonialism and imperialism.

Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America,
by Firoozeh Dumas

Dumas makes us laugh as she recounts her experiences growing up Iranian in America in the 1970s.

Iran Awakening: From Prison to Peace Prize, One Woman's Struggle at the Crossroads of History, by Shirin Ebadi

Having won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003, Ebadi, a human rights lawyer, describes her struggles on behalf of Iranian women and children, as well as the challenges of her personal life.

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A World Between: Poems, Short Stories, and Essays by Iranian-Americans, edited by Persis M. Karim and Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami, and *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora*, edited by Persis Karim

These delightful anthologies of nonfiction, fiction, and poetry provide wide-ranging perspectives on the experience of being Iranian-American.

Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution, by Nikki R. Keddie

This is a thoughtful yet highly readable textbook on the 1979 revolution that includes a rich introduction to Iranian history before that turning point.

Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran, by Azadeh Moaveni

The author interweaves her own personal journey as an Iranian-American with stories about reporting on Iran for publications in the United States.

Persepolis 1: The Story of a Childhood, and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*, by Marjane Satrapi

These graphic novels tell of the author's childhood in Iran after the Islamic Revolution and her return there after her studies in Europe.